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Hostage Question Dogs Carter This Week Amid Speculation of Secret Negotiations

By TIMOTHY D. SCHILLHARDT

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

NEW YORK — The unresolved Iranian hostage situation again is dogging President Carter, causing new concern among some of his political strategists.

The 52 hostages will have been held a year on Election Day. Largely dormant since the nominating conventions, the issue has arisen this week at practically every campaign stop where Mr. Carter takes questions from his audiences. Twice yesterday and three times the day before the President, stumping in the Northeast, faced questions about the hostages' safety and the likelihood of their release.

Mr. Carter always responds that the best available intelligence indicates the hostages are safe and being treated well. At the same time, he says, as he did yesterday at Hofstra University, that he doesn't see "any immediate prospect" for their release.

Presidential aides say they aren't sure why the hostage matter has suddenly cropped up so often, but they offer possible explanations. For one thing, rumors are afloat that the administration is secretly negotiating for the hostages' freedom. Those rumblings continued yesterday as Mr. Carter again made conciliatory signals to Iran. In addition, the visit to the United Nations here of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Rajai began speculation that the President and the prime minister would meet.

"No Real Possibility"

Mr. Carter told reporters yesterday he would be willing to meet with Mr. Rajai if the prime minister was "amenable to a meeting." Later, through a spokesman, Mr. Carter said he saw "no real possibility" of such a meeting.

One campaign strategist also believes the hostage issue has reemerged because Americans worry that the continuing Iran-Iraq war increases the danger to the hostages' safety.

Whatever the reason, presidential strategists say they're nervous about the political effects. One presidential adviser thinks many voters may be so frustrated if the hostages haven't been freed by the Election Day anniversary that they will vote against Mr. Carter for that reason alone.

It may be a re-emerging awareness of this—and the assumption of many that the administration is certain to do something about the hostages before the election—that is producing the flurry of rumors about their possible release. Aides to Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan have long said they expected some kind of "October surprise" from Mr. Carter.

Among the stories circulating were reports that U.S. transport planes were standing by, ready to be loaded with spare parts and flown to Iran to pick up the hostages in exchange. The parts are needed for Iran to pursue its war with Iraq. Another rumor had Treasury officials preparing to release Iranian gold that has been impounded in the U.S. for months. But the government flatly denied these and other reports.

"I can absolutely assure you that nothing is going on in this building relating to spare parts and hostages," a top Pentagon official declared.

"Integrity" and "Safety"

The President, in responding to questions, attempts to make two points about his handling of the matter. He says he has maintained two basic principles since the hostages were taken: to protect the "integrity and the principles" of the U.S. and "not to do anything as a President that would endanger the lives or the safety" of the hostages.

Mr. Carter never mentions the aborted rescue mission of last April, which claimed the lives of eight U.S. servicemen, and he never indicates that that mission might have endangered the lives and safety of the hostages.

The administration has sent several conciliatory signals to Iran. While campaigning the past two days, Mr. Carter repeatedly has termed Iraq the aggressor in its conflict with Iran. The President on Wednesday said the U.S. opposes any effort "to dismember Iran" and urged again an immediate end to the hostilities and the start of negotiations to settle differences.